

## GENERAL TREKKING ADVICE

The style of trekking you choose depends largely upon personal taste and cost. But when making the choice give a thought, not only the experiences and memories you wish to take away, but to the impact and impressions you wish to leave behind.

### Going with a major trekking agency

Some prefer to join an organized group trek where everything is managed by the trekking company, with no 'unknowns'. Such treks are typically to the most popular destinations such as Annapurna and Everest. Accommodation is in tourist lodges or tents. The agency provides the itinerary, porters, and camping equipment as required. Trekkers often build up a close relationship with their English-speaking guides, but have limited contact with local inhabitants.

Expect to pay considerably more if you book through a major trekking agency, particularly one based in Europe. Read the reviews carefully. Most trekkers are very satisfied. But a minority are surprised to find that their tents are pitched in the courtyards of tourist lodges, or that the 'luxury lodges' they paid for are less than luxurious, and other guests are paying a tenth of what they are paying.

It is also important to find out what they pay their porters, what training and equipment they give them, and provisions in the unlikely event of an accident or death. For your own safety find out what training and equipment they give their guides, and how they would deal with a disaster such as the blizzard in October 2014 (See box). Paying more for your trek, or having genuine Sherpas, does not necessarily mean you are in safer hands.

Awareness about negative impacts on the environment has grown greatly, thanks to the work of agencies such as Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). In ACAP, lodges avoid the use of firewood by installing solar-heated water, and utilizing gas or kerosene stoves. Agency camping treks are normally environmentally sensitive, carry kerosene for cooking, and take care to carry out, bury or burn their waste. There are many companies these days which claim to be eco-friendly or to have an ethical basis. Don't be afraid to ask questions of them.

### Going it alone – with some help!

There are others who prefer the freedom and sense of adventure to hike independently, off the beaten track, staying in local teashop-lodges or people's homes. Your expenditure will be less, and the bulk of it will benefit needy people in the local communities.

This does not mean that you have to dispense with a guide or porter – though you may do so if you wish. The advantages of hiring a porter or guide, or a guide-cum-porter are many. They know the route, and those with a modicum of English can act as interpreters and cultural mediators, deepening your experience. There are countless small trekking agencies who will arrange this for you, as well as individuals (list below). Guides may be licensed or unlicensed. If going higher up mountains than the routes described here, make sure you take a licensed (i.e. trained) guide. All guides speak English, and may be willing to carry a small portion of your gear, but these days even porters speak a little English. Having someone who can interpret, will enrich your exchanges with the locals and the overall rewards of the trek. Check carefully what the agency pays their porters or recommends that you do. With this style of trekking you do not need to pre-book; arrangements can be made after you arrive in the country. We give our personal recommendation for the names below, but there are many others equally reliable and trustworthy.

None of the treks described in this guidebook require camping equipment, but they do assume that trekkers are willing to stay in basic local lodges (sometimes termed teashops) or in local homes (homestays), eating food cooked from local produce (see Accommodation below).

### Finding a trekking agency or hiring porters and guides

There are hosts of small trekking agencies around Thamel in Kathmandu or at Pokhara Lakeside. The best advice is to go on the recommendations of others: talk to a satisfied customer and enquire with theirs. Below are a few which are worth checking out for one good reason or another. Generally, all trekking agencies will be able to provide you with a porter or guide if you wish to strike out independently.

### **Trekking agencies**

- *Three Sisters* (Pokhara, ph 9846047356) – trains and employs only female porters. Strong ethical pro-poor slant and fair wages. Invest profits in community development.
- *Wayfarers* (Pokhara, ph 9856034774)–
- *Eden Treks*
- *Ethical Trekking*
- Man Bahadur Khatri (ph 9849413854) – experienced, licensed, climbing mountain guide (has summited Everest and other major 8000m peaks).

### **Independent guides/porters**

We have employed the following and can recommend them as reliable, trustworthy and knowledgeable, but there are many others:-

- *Lal Bahadur Chantyal* (Pokhara, ph 9846208598/9814147210) – experienced licensed guide, based in Pokhara, but home is Gurja Khani. Familiar with all Hidden Village routes, and many more. Has basic mountain climbing rope skills. Speaks English.
- *Tam Bahadur Chantyal* (ph 9846815677) – experienced guide-cum-porter, based in Gurja Khani. Familiar with all Hidden Village routes. Will organize high altitude camping treks to Gurja Himal basecamp). Speaks a little English.
- *Hem Bahadur Magar* (ph 9867703577/9746724608) – porter, based in Darbang. Familiar with main route to Hidden Village.
- *Balaram (Bill) Bhohora* (ph 9808750506/9843384161) – guide-cum-porter, based in Baglung town. Familiar with main routes to Gurja Khani. Speaks good English.
- *Peshan Gharti* (ph 9806162032) - porter, based in Dhar (last major village before Dhaulagiri Sanctuary). Familiar with Rahu Khola and route to Dhaulagiri South Face Sanctuary. Limited English.

Inquire by phone their current rates. Porters are becoming hard to find. A fair wage for a porter or porter-guide is in the range of 1000-1200 Rs (8-12\$) per day plus food and lodging (more if they have to pay their own), and up to 25\$ per day for a licensed English-speaking guide.

### **Trekking permits**

There is no need of a TIMS trekking permit for a trek to Hidden Village. However, if you are taking a route via Dhorpatan you will need to purchase an entry permit for the Hunting Reserve. This costs Rs 3300 and can be bought in Kathmandu at Brikruti Mandap (the building which sells TIMS permits) or on entry (according to TAAN \_ Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal). If you are planning to trek beyond Gurja to Dolpo or around Dhaulagiri or Annapurna you will need to purchase the appropriate passes before setting out. TIMS permits and ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area) entry passes can be obtained in Pokhara (office at Dam Side) or at Brikruti Mandap (National Tourism Board Office) Kathmandu.

### **When to go**

The best months for trekking are October and November when it should be dry and the views clear. Occasionally the dregs of the monsoon extend into early October. Early December is good for clear views but colder and there may be snow on the high passes. Snow is common during the winter rains (late December to late January). The second trekking season is March –

May. The views are more hazy than in autumn, but this deficit is more than compensated by the spectacular flowering of the rhododendron forests.

Even in the best season the snow peaks tend to become cloud-covered by midday. They can be more awe-inspiring with a cloak of cloud, but if you wish for impregnable views, make sure you time your departures to reach the viewpoints in the morning hours.

If you don't mind trekking in the rain, then go in the monsoon months of June-September. You will see Nepal in its greenest and most festive state, abuzz with field work and fertility. These are the months for transhumance to the high pastures, and searching for *yarsa gumpa* – the greatly-prized aphrodisiac (see box).

#### More valuable than gold

Yarsa gumpa ... 'winter worm summer grass' ...himalayan viagra ... *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*. This curious fungus is found in springtime above 4000 metres in the Himalayas. In 2013 one gram of the substance cost a consumer in China \$100 (US) – more than a gram of gold – though gatherers receive considerably less. No wonder that in May and June every year the *yarsa gumpa* gold rush hits Nepal.

Its creation begins with caterpillar larva of the *Ghost Moth* which develop underground. Occasionally one of these becomes infected with the spores of the fungus. The caterpillar dies but its mummified body hosts the fungus which, as the snow melts, sends up a stalk-like shoot above the soil. A 15<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan text describes the fungus as 'the faultless treasure'. It is an aphrodisiac and said to strengthen the immune and circulatory systems.

It has become a major source of cash income for the poorest families in high-altitude villages such as Gurja Khani. During the harvest period, tens of thousands ascend to the high-altitude pastures in the search. Now there are fears that over-collection is depleting the spores and harvests are reducing.

#### What to wear and bring

People vary greatly in their sensitivity to cold and the amount they want to carry. In October the temperature can be over 30°C (86°F) at lower altitudes; by November it can drop to freezing point at nights in Gurja Khani. Even in cold weather you can work up a sweat while climbing, so it is best to wear several thin layers which can be adjusted. At high altitude in the afternoon, when the sun disappears behind the nearest mountain, the temperature plummets. Be warned that Nepali homes are extremely well ventilated with plentiful gaps and cracks in their walls! This is when you need all your warm gear.

A lightweight waterproof is recommended in case of rain. Footwear should be comfortable and have a non-slip sole. Heavy boots are not necessary unless you are used to them; Nepalis walk these trails wearing broken trainers, gumboots, and flip-flops. It can be useful to carry a pair of lightweight slippers for use in and around the homestays. Some people find a lightweight telescopic walking pole helpful for the downhill.

A torch is essential. Most trekkers carry a sleeping bag or at least a sheet sleeping bag. Warm covers will be provided but in the teashop lodges there is no knowing how many people have slept in them. Homestay hosts have been trained to provide clean linen but this does not mean it is guaranteed. If you are planning to trek higher than the trails described in this guide you need to be prepared to carry your own tent and all the necessary provisions.

Carrying some snacks can provide a quick boost of energy when teashops are far apart and provide a welcome variation from the local diet. If you are a coffee addict you may want to carry along a small tin of instant coffee as teashops only sell – guess what – tea. Small shops in the major villages sell a limited selection of sweets, biscuits and savoury snacks, and occasionally mango juice, sodas, and chocolate wafer bars. You are unlikely to find bottled water,

so carry some water purification tablets or equivalent. Toilet paper is only available in pharmacies in roadside towns such as Baglung and Beni.

### Accommodation

Lodging will be in simple 'homestays' or local 'tea-shop' lodges which exist to serve the local population. What these places lack in facilities they make up for in their friendliness. Lodges are positioned on the main footpaths. The homestays and lodges are named in the day-by-day Trail Guide (on the website) under the relevant route and day. To find the homestays when you arrive in a village, look for the Homestay flag or ask for directions (*homestay kahaa chha?*).

#### Image.

**Homestays** offer trekkers a small private room in the family home. Guests are drawn into family life, invited to sit around the cooking hearth in the evening. Homestays are aiming for a higher standard of cleanliness and comfort than the teashop lodges. Expect a small room with a small double bed or twin beds, some type of mattress (may be rather hard!), a thick duvet, and clean sheets. Some homestays may be rather rudimentary initially, but facilities will improve as the number of trekkers increases and owners gain a better understanding of foreigners' likes and dislikes. Since the family have their farming chores, they cannot provide food and drink at any hour. You may be offered tea on arrival, but food will only be cooked in the morning and evening. However, there is nothing more pleasant than sitting on the verandah observing village life. In a homestay you will experience in full measure the natural friendly hospitality of Nepali folk.

In the **teashop lodges** you are likely to be given a private room, though you might have to share a dormitory. Mattresses are commonly two rice-straw mats covered by a blanket. The rooms in both the lodges and the homestays are likely to be draughty, since windows and shutters are rarely a tight fit. Warm bedding in the form of a heavy cotton-filled duvet or blankets will be provided, but you may not be the first person to have slept in those sheets and covers! The advantage of a teashop lodge over a homestay is that they are in the business of providing food and drink which you may order at any time.

If you end up in a settlement where there is neither a lodge nor an established homestay, do not panic. Simply ask someone where you can stay, (*bas basne kahaa huncha?*) and they will guide you to somebody's home. Providing hospitality to travellers is tradition in rural Nepal. Your hosts will expect you to pay for the food you eat, but not for the accommodation. However, it is a nice gesture to offer them something for the accommodation, even if they refuse to accept it.

### Sanitation and water

Every teashop-lodge and homestay has its own pit latrine. Though none of them will have a seat or a built-in flush mechanism, they are generally clean, most have a water-seal ceramic slab, and all of them should have a bucket of water and a jug for flushing. Be conservative with the water you use as it may have to be carried from some distance away.

Currently, very few teashop lodges or homestays have constructed a separate shower cubicle, but they will provide a bucket of hot water (for a small additional charge) and you can shower down in the toilet. Otherwise you can wash - as they do - at the public tapstand or local spring. Nepali women are extremely modest and never expose their private parts. With some practice you can learn to shower as they do, wearing a sarong wrap. Gurja Khani village has plans to construct a public solar-heated shower house for its inhabitants and tourists.

### Food and drinks

You will almost certainly be offered the staple vegetarian dish of Nepal - *dal-bhaat* - lentils or beans (the protein), with rice and spiced in-season vegetables, accompanied by a chutney or relish. For a set price you get as many helpings as you can eat. For an additional fee they may offer meat, fish, or eggs. The villagers' staple is a porridge made of maize, millet, wheat, or buckwheat, but you will have to press them to sample this, though you may be offered flat-

bread (roti/chapatti/paratha) as an alternative. In Baglung, the typical chutney is made from the seeds of *cannabis sativa*, or from *timur* - the citrus-tasting fruit husks of a small wild tree. The chutneys are tasty but their hygienic preparation cannot be guaranteed. If you need a quick snack, they can prepare popcorn, though it will not pop into the white fluffy variety of cinemas.

Village shops sell packs of *dal-mote* (spicy roast lentils), sometimes potato crisps, and a variety of biscuits and candy sweets, as well as packets of *chow-chow* (dried noodles) which locals munch uncooked as a snack. It is a lucky day if you find a chocolate bar. In Baglung and Beni crisp delicious apples from Marpha are available in the autumn months, and in December and January, the trails are littered with the peel of local tangerines and oranges.

If you are staying in a Magar, Chantyal, or artisan community, you are likely to be offered the local brew. *Rakshi* is a spirit distilled from millet or other grains, or you may be offered the local beer (*jhar* or *chang*) made from fermented rice, barley, or millet. This can be quite tasty, but the fermented grain is mashed into untreated water by hand. The alcohol content may eliminate most bacteria - but not all.

Tea is widely available. Near motor roads you can buy bottles of coca-cola, sprite etc, bottles of beer, and Kukhri brand rum, and small packs of mango juice, and you might find a tin of instant coffee. The one drink you are most unlikely to find on off-the-beaten treks is bottled water, so be prepared - and let's keep it that way. Nepal does not need discarded plastic water bottles on its trash heaps.

### Rates for accommodation, food, and local guides

Charging guests for the bed(room) is a new concept in rural areas; traditionally, lodging has been provided free of cost to travelers in teashop lodges and homes, providing they pay for the evening meal. We are promoting a 'star' ranking for homestays, to encourage improvements and ensure standards, with homestays charging according to their star ranking:-

- ❖ 1 star - circa. 100 Rs per person per night. Basic room, Nepali-sized beds (!), thin mattress, warm duvet, clean bed linen).
- ❖ 2 star - circa 150 Rs pp/night. Bigger room and beds, sponge mattress, warm duvet, clean bed linen, more variety in menu.
- ❖ 3 star - circa 200 Rs pp/night. Higher standards in general, separate shower room, wider variety of food, English spoken. (English may be spoken elsewhere, but it is requirement for 3 star status).

In the **teashop lodges** bed charges are unlikely to exceed 100 Rs per person per night.

For the standard vegetarian *daal-bhaat* meal, expect to pay around Rs 150. Double this if you eat meat, and as a rule of thumb increase the price by 50 Rs for every day that you trek beyond motorized transport (since the rice will have to be portered). For a bucket of hot water, offer 100-150 Rs. You are welcome to pay more than these minimum rates, but do not be excessive since this raises unrealistic expectations for the future.

Trekking agencies have fixed rates for the hire of their guides and porters. When hiring in a village there are no set rates, and what they ask will depend upon demand and precedence. In 2015, a fair rate for a porter was Rs1000 a day plus food and accommodation, though you may have to pay more at festival times or busy farming seasons. If they guide you for a full day's journey, it is only fair to cover their return journey. For an English-speaking guide expect to pay a minimum of 1500 Rs plus food and accommodation per day, up to 2500 Rs for a licensed guide.

### Cash and security

There are ATM machines in Pokhara, Baglung (bazaar), and Beni, but nothing beyond these, so carry wads of cash rupees with you. Shopkeepers in small settlements might be willing to change dollar notes but don't rely upon it.

One advantage of going off-the-beaten trek is that theft and other crimes are practically zero. Village honesty is legendary. Over the years we have carelessly left cameras, binoculars, and wallets at resting spots, only to have villagers race after us to hand them over. Nevertheless, do not tempt an opportunistic thief or child; it is wise to take sensible precautions with your money and belongings.

Nepal is an extremely safe place for women trekkers, and on the trails described in this guidebook there is no need to be suspicious or worried if you encounter locals in a lonely spot of forest. However, it is not advisable to trek alone on difficult footpaths or uninhabited areas – even if you are male. One slip in an unguarded moment can send you over the edge. Every year hundreds of trekkers meet with minor falls, and one or two die.

**Note:** The statements above concerning theft do not apply to the major trekking routes and tourist destinations, although they used to. Unfortunately, the number of tourists, and the quantity of high-value equipment and money they carry, has attracted thieves from outside the local communities. Compared to many countries, the risk of theft in Nepal is still low, but be careful, especially in crowded urban areas.

### Health, safety, and first aid

The most likely sickness to hit a trekker is a water-borne **diarrhoeal disease**. Assume that all water sources are unclean, even those with pipes and cement tapstands. Use water-purification pills or request your host to boil some water for you to drink. Nepalis commonly eat food with their hands but unless you have access to clean water, plentiful soap or surgical gel, this can be another source of contamination. It is not impolite to request a spoon.

**Dehydration** is the next most common risk, making you feel faint and weak. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, especially if you are suffering from diarrhoea. It is helpful to carry some rehydration packs in case of need. These are available in pharmacies and may even be available in small health centres along the trail. If not, **the solution can be made by taking 3 cups of clean boiled water, adding 1 tablespoon of sugar, and a pinch of salt.** **Altitude sickness** is a life-threatening condition, but rare below 3000 metres altitude, and unlikely below 4000 metres if

#### Blizzard October 2014

In the peak trekking season of October 2014, when normally the skies are blue and temperatures mild, an unseasonably cold and wet weather mass hit Nepal (the tail end of a cyclone), causing heavy blizzards and ferocious winds in the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri region. 43 people lost their lives and 514 were rescued by helicopter, most of them on the Thorung La pass (5416m) on the Annapurna Circuit route. Half of the fatalities were foreign trekkers, and half were their Nepali guides and porters.

Trekkers criticized the trekking agencies for the inexperienced and ill-equipped guides and porters. The trekking agencies blamed the government for the lack of weather warnings. The government blamed ‘trekkers without permits’ who pushed on when they should have hung back. In short, everyone, and no-one, was to blame.

The Government is promising to improve its early warning system and construct hundreds of shelters, but the pace of action is likely to be glacial. The weather in October 2014 was an extreme event, but every now and then tourists are caught in avalanches, landslides, and earthquakes. Being prepared, and being confident of the right thing to do, can save your life.

One survivor of Thorung La commented: “As a trekker you have a responsibility to yourself, but also to the people who take you there. You must understand that the guides are not as competent as they seem.” An Australian climber on a nearby peak saved himself and his Sherpa guide by digging a snow cave. His Sherpa, who had summited Everest several times, was not aware of this survival tip.

you have properly acclimatized. The symptoms of altitude sickness – headache, breathlessness, nausea – are not necessarily a sign to descend immediately unless the person is acting confused. But if in doubt, descend. Altitude sickness hits the young and fit more than the old and unfit. The best antidote is to acclimatize slowly.

Skin infections are common and small wounds can easily turn septic if they are not properly treated. A small tube of antiseptic/antibiotic cream is useful, as well as band-aids. Some people carry a course of a broad-spectrum antibiotic with them if traveling to a remote area for a prolonged period, but to get this you will need to visit a doctor and explain your plans.

Should you fall sick, you will be obliged to self-treat, or return to base, or ask where the nearest health centre lies. Every VDC is supposed to have a health clinic or a health worker of some kind. Basic medications may be available, and the advice will generally be sound.

### Communications while on trek

The penetration of mobile telephone communications into the remote valleys of rural Nepal has been remarkable. Hardly a village remains that is not in range of a mobile signal. A local SIM card in your mobile phone can be an economic and useful tool for communicating, not only in an emergency, but also in calling ahead for accommodation in your proposed destination. You can even get internet via a local SIM, although it will be very slow. The mobile service recommended for the widest rural coverage is NTC Namaste.

Even the Hidden Village, Gurjakhani, now has a NTC mobile telephone mast and this greatly facilitates communication for trekkers as well as for Gurjakhani families with family members in other parts of the country and overseas.

### Code of behaviour

Nepalis are tolerant people, and make allowances for tourists. However, the more you can fit in with their code of conduct, the friendlier will be your reception. The first rule is to smile. The second to be patient and hold your temper. Aside from these, try to learn and respect the following:

- Feet/shoes are unclean. When entering a home remove your shoes and leave them at the entrance. Avoid touching people with your feet.
- It is discourteous to step over someone's legs (this is to place yourself above them). Nepalis normally squat or sit cross-legged but many foreigners find these positions uncomfortable. When sitting on the floor it is alright to stretch out your legs, providing your feet point away from other people. Make sure you lift your feet up when someone wishes to pass by.
- Food or drink touched by your lips or by a hand which has touched your mouth, is ritually unclean and cannot be eaten by others. To save wasting food, request a small portion initially - you will always be offered a second helping. Nepalis never share a spoon or plate of food with another, except for dry snacks such as popcorn. Avoid touching a common vessel of water with your lips. If Nepalis ask to share your water bottle, they will pour the water down their throats without touching their lips to the bottle. It takes skill not to choke! Before eating, you will be offered a vessel of water for washing your hands. If needed, ask for soap.
- For women, skimpy shorts and tops will attract stares and cause offence. If the weather is very hot, carry a loose sarong which can be quickly wrapped around when entering a village. Normally it is best to wear something which covers knees and shoulders. Shorts are acceptable for men when trekking but will not win respect in a government office.
- Avoid giving children sweets, pens, or money. It is only along the well-trammeled tourist routes that they have learned to beg for these items. In the homestay the best gift is to

spend time playing with them and speaking English. If your heart compels you to give, then a donation to the local school will help the whole community.

- Nepali people are unaccustomed and uncomfortable with overt shows of affection between couples. Hold off until you are alone!

### Respect the environment

- Most teashop lodges and homestays are dependent upon firewood for cooking. Be considerate of the forests, and their labour to gather the firewood, by coordinating your orders for cooked food and hot drinks.
- If you need to defecate where there is no latrine, make sure you bury your toilet paper and cover over your poop with dead leaves or straw to deter flies from carrying disease. Choose a spot away from the walking trail and avoid any sources of water.
- Do not throw litter. Carry it and burn at the end of the day.
- Turn off public taps, and shut any gates which you pass through.
- Avoid damaging the flora and fauna. In national parks, no picking of flowers is allowed.
- Be careful not to carelessly start a fire.